

frieze

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What Can't Be Read

How Bethany Collins, Steffani Jemison, Adam Pendleton and Kameelah Janan Rasheed are using the tradition of black radical poetry to examine questions of subjectivity and race

BY EVAN MOFFITT

When is a poem a picture? In his seminal theoretical text, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (2003), Fred Moten asks: 'What are the internal relations within that experience between the intellection of the poem's meaning and the sensing of its visuality and/or auralty? What are the relations between versions of or variations on the poem, manifestations of the eye and ear that raise the too deep question of the ontological status of the poem itself?' Moten's own poems feel good on my tongue as I recite them and their rhythm is integral to their meaning. He argues that the gap or 'break' between a poem's meaning and its aesthetic effects can be fertile ground for radical politics, a space of emotional resonance that conventional language struggles to articulate.

A generation of artists inspired by Moten has seized on the poet and theorist's title as a proposition, breaking apart texts from literary and historical sources to build new forms out of the wreckage. Language, broadly speaking, has long been a central concern for many black contemporary artists – Glenn Ligon, Pope.L, Lorna Simpson and Carrie Mae Weems come to mind – but this younger generation draws inspiration directly from literary sources: the poetry of Amiri Baraka, Tisa Bryant, Moten, Harryette Mullen, Claudia Rankine and others. Unlike many of their artistic predecessors, they fracture sentences and split words, collaging them together in ways that often refuse coherence. Their work acknowledges that identity is complicated by the language we use to define and express it.

Adam Pendleton quotes diverse literary sources in prints and wallpapers, collaged text and scanned photographs that embrace this condition of illegibility. For 'shot him in the face', his 2017 show at KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin, which later toured to Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art in Gateshead, Pendleton installed a vinyl wallpaper bearing the provocative opening line from Ron Silliman's 1981 poem 'Albany', enlarged in black block letters: 'If the function of writing is to "express the world".' Silliman's poem continues in a cycle of short, flat sentences about race and class in Albany, California.

Pendleton, meanwhile, deploys a literal flatness to question art or writing's imperative to 'express the world'. at KW, black and white silkscreened images of work by Pablo Picasso, photographs of a dada dancer from 1916 and a dancing Congolese couple, as well as a page from a book of Chinese textiles were cropped and layered into a near-abstract pattern. Several other quotes from Silliman appeared on the wall, fragmented and framed, such as the line: 'A woman on the train asks Angela Davis for an autograph,' from which only Davis's name, 'train' and 'woman' were discernible.

The breakdown of language is part of what Pendleton refers to as 'Black dada', a term he has used since 2009 for his most important and extensive series to date. The phrase is borrowed from Amiri Baraka's 1964 poem 'Black Dada Nihilismus', a seminal early text of the Black Arts Movement. Baraka invokes both the nihilism of dada and its dark depictions of the eroding social and political order in post-World War I Europe to voice the frustrations of black

Americans of the Civil Rights movement fighting against systemic racism and violence during the Vietnam War.

In his 'Black Dada' paintings, Pendleton riffs on the famous refrain in Hugo Ball's 1916 'Dada Manifesto' – 'dada m'dada dada mhm' – to link different historical avant-gardes. The letters of 'dada' permutate alongside blown-up images of Sol LeWitt's 'Incomplete Open Cubes' (1974). Like LeWitt's modular geometry, language is a system open to endless reconfiguration and

renewal. Reading Ball's manifesto as not only a nonsense poem, but a political treatise alongside Pendleton's own work, MoMA PS1 curator Jenny Schlenzka has argued that Pendleton 'recovers dada's tactical nonsense as a precursor weapon against a society that naturalizes racial identity in the service of oppression and exploitation'.

Kameelah Janan Rasheed leverages that same 'tactical nonsense' in her architecturally scaled, fragmentary, text-based collages. *A Supple Perimeter*(2017), which was included in the 2017 exhibition 'Speech/Acts' at ICA Philadelphia, begs to be read, though its sentences fall apart as soon as they begin to form. Across two long, black walls, photocopied

and excised words are pinned in loose clusters that hover near eye level, recalling poet Douglas Kearney's 'performative typography'. A framed image of a hand pressed against the



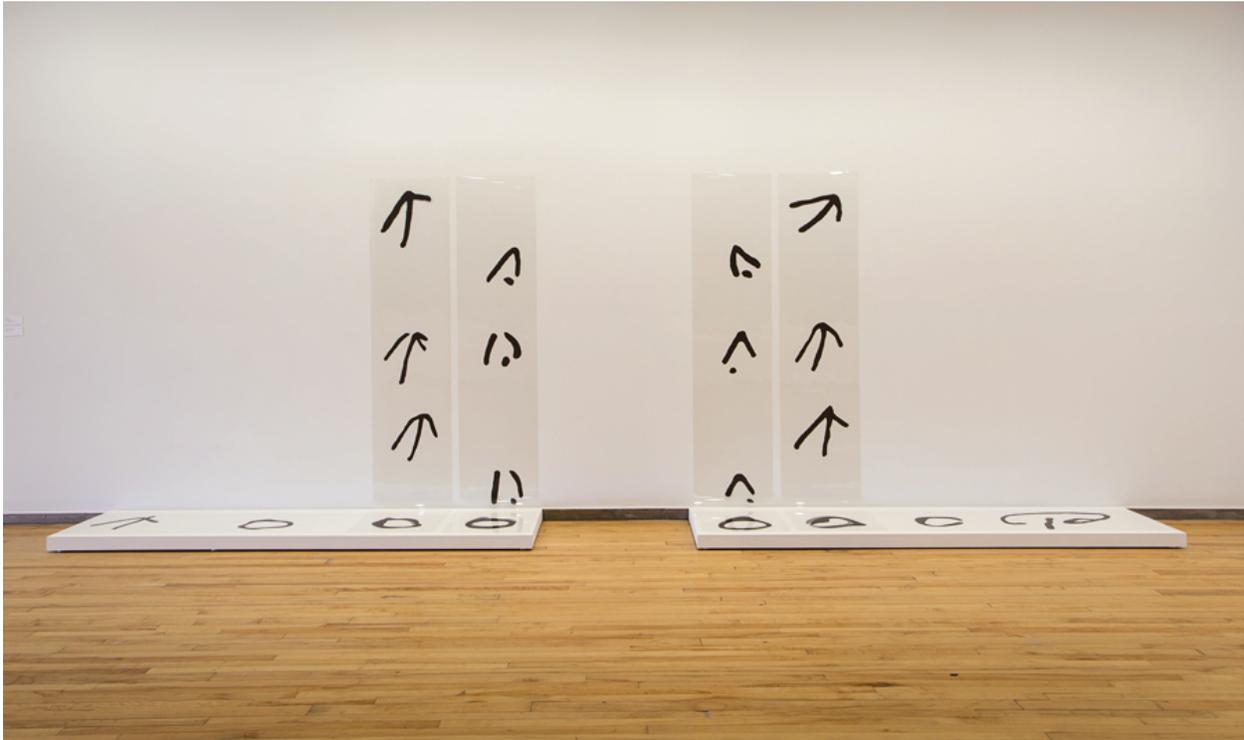
Kameelah Janan Rasheed, 'A Supple Perimeter', 2017, exhibition view at Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's Art Center at Governors Island, New York. Courtesy: the artist and LMCC, New York; photograph: Ornella Friggit © LMCC

glass of a scanner hangs at the fulcrum of this frieze, as if to block the advance of our gaze. 'Refuses to do that' is pasted over the palm, while an adjacent blank page bears the simple prepositional phrase: 'inside the offering of'. An offering and a refusal: Rasheed's words and gestures conflict because, her work argues, one's marginality is always a conflicted state. Nearby, the words 'and black?' in bold, Helvetica type have been slid across the surface of a live photocopier, creating a woozy distortion that sets even the nature of the question into doubt. 'And black?' What's black? Who's asking?

'I want to hear./the rhythm/of rupture,' one line reads. and elsewhere: 'a sentence is structured/ TO-AND-FRO-MOVEMENTS/sentence and race through the words.' Rasheed's fragmentary collage engages in a sly mimesis: it pronounces the cause of its illegibility. 'Rupture' recalls what Moten once wrote of one of Baraka's favoured poetic devices: 'Montage renders inoperative any simple opposition of totality to singularity. It makes you linger in the cut between them, a generative space that fills and erases itself.' I linger in Rasheed's cut, looking for fugitive meaning, only for the work to refuse my reading.

Towards the end of the installation, hung low to the floor, a framed scan of fingertips, lined up like a policeman's record, serves as the artist's signature. Prints are evidence, but they also leave a more personal trace of daily life, like the grease stains on the pages of a well-thumbed novel. Here we find ourselves, perhaps, at the 'supple perimeter' of the work's title – a body or a text reclaimed as a margin fertile for political discourse.

The grain of a photocopy reminds me of the many texts on art history, theory and philosophy that I received as handouts in university classes. When scanned, books that are smaller than standard A4 paper leave a black frame of negative space around the blinding whiteness of the duplicated page. The stark, two-tone aesthetic of the photocopy is central to Pendleton's and Rasheed's practices, just as black and white dominates the work of many of their peers. 'Speech/Acts', which considered six artists of colour working with poetry and the black radical tradition, was virtually monochromatic. Setting aside the obvious racial metaphor, the clash of black and white offers a dialectical contrast that alludes to the many conflicted states of marginalized identity, and to conditions of visibility and invisibility.



Steffani Jemison, 'Plant You Now, Dig You Later', 2017, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and MASS MoCa, North Adams; photograph: David Dashiell

If the master's tools can never dismantle the master's house, neither can his tongue unravel his discourse. To that end, interrupted speech and written text can serve as critical poetic devices for artists to craft more inclusive, open-ended language. Steffani Jemison's work considers the way black Americans throughout history have invented languages, spoken and unspoken, to circumvent racist attempts to silence their expression. 'Plant You Now, Dig You Later', Jemison's sweeping show which opened in March 2017 at Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, focuses on a series of 'hieroglyphic characters' that Nat Turner, the leader of an 1831 slave rebellion, claimed he saw in a corn field and took as divine inspiration. Enlarged on sheets of acetate mounted on the gallery walls and running onto the floor, the scrawled, snaking symbols have a runic quality, as if they predate the Latin alphabet. Other sheets bear the ideographic marks of Solresol, a language based on the Solfège system of musical notation, devised by composer François Sudre in 1827.

Sudre envisioned Solresol as a universal idiom; the symbols' unfamiliarity to the modern eye is a mark of their ultimate failure. Mixed in with Sudre's notation are letters from the Hamptonese alphabet – a cryptic language devised by the self-taught black artist James Hampton, from

Washington D.C, who spent more than a decade building an elaborate golden throne and altar from salvaged materials in response to religious visions. Indecipherable but inspired: language in Jemison's work is as much a tool of communication as it is an expression of interiority. It's not clear how Hampton and Turner developed their runic systems, but their lack of clarity (to the white gaze?) seems to be the point. Here, poetry and its building blocks are a means of escape, of liberation, of utopic imagination.

Jemison is a writer and poet, too, and her use of the archive often results in more legible text-based works than those of Pendleton or Rasheed. *You Completes Me* (2013–ongoing), a poem composed of sentences lifted from self-published novels the artist bought at street-side bookstands in Harlem, arranges words typologically to form a non-narrative story. Clusters of adjectives (fat/juicy legs/fine as fuck) compete with brand-name signifiers (Escalade/Lexus/Charger). Street slang appears alongside questions of existential melodrama: 'Have you ever been wounded in your soul and paralyzed with grief?' This work acquires some of the rhythms of life in Harlem, from its intellectual and pulp histories to the daily chatter of its residents. While not all of the novellas function as portraits of the neighbourhood, Jemison's work uses language to draw our attention to issues of class, race and gender that dominate everyday life there.

Bethany Collins's *America: A Hymnal* (2017) employs a similar cut-and-paste technique, compiling scores for 100 different versions of the 19th-century ballad 'My Country, 'Tis of Thee' to tell a story of US history through popular music and nationalistic expression. The tune for the early, pre-revolutionary anthem was famously borrowed from 'God save the Queen'. Later in the century, it was adapted as a battle hymn by suffragettes and abolitionists, who used the song's title and opening line – 'My country 'tis of thee,/ sweet land of liberty' – as an ironic jab at the nation's hypocrisies. Collins's collage process recalls Robin Coste Lewis's 'Voyage of the Sable Venus' (2015), a multi-part poem composed entirely of titles of Western artworks that reference the black female figure. Lewis's devastating poem makes clear the extent to which women of colour have been treated as exotic objects throughout history. Collins's book, too, gives me the impression of an avid reader combing the archive of US history in search of something they can recognize, only to realize that that history was written to exclude them.

'Perhaps the most insidious and least understood form of segregation is that of the word,' Rankine writes in her book *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014), which has been a touchstone,



Bethany Collins, *America: A Hymnal*, 2017, 100 laser-cut leaves, 15 × 23 × 2 cm. Courtesy: the artist, Patron Gallery and Candor Arts, Chicago; photograph: Timothy Johnson

since its publication, for many artists working with poetry. Citing an episode during the 2006 World Cup, in which a racist slur was directed at Zinedine Zidane – a french footballer of Algerian descent – Rankine notes that 'illustrations of this kind of racial prejudice can be multiplied indefinitely', the way a word can be repeated, on a tongue or across a chalkboard. It's what Kearney calls a 'stutter': we are forced to witness the same kind of racist violence over and over again, like a word lodged in the throat. I'm reminded of the psychoanalyst and philosopher Frantz Fanon's observation that the child who cries, 'Look Daddy! A Negro!' produces blackness by declaring and circumscribing difference. People turn. Fingers point. A crowd becomes a lynch mob.

In violently splitting apart the body of a text, these artists nevertheless refuse to picture the physical violence inflicted on the bodies of people of colour. Poetry's critical evasiveness thus offers a way to articulate the effects of oppression without reproducing them in echo. By trying to capture the essence of words, poetry at once fails to express the world – per Silliman and Pendleton – while also proving indispensable to our experience of it. If race is a social construct, then language plays a key role in perpetuating and legitimizing the terms of racial difference. For these artists, words are both a trap and an escape hatch. Racist epithets and laws use language to marginalize the black body, but poetry deconstructs syntax in ways that could set it free. It might be paradoxically 'in the break' that things – our words, our world – become unbroken.

Bethany Collins is an artist based in Chicago, USA. In 2017, she had solo exhibitions at Patron Gallery, Chicago, and 1708 Gallery, Richmond, and was featured in ten group exhibitions, including 'Another Country' at Broad Art Museum, East Lansing, Michigan, 'Gray Matters' at the Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio, and 'Excerpt' at The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York (all USA).

Steffani Jemison is an artist and writer based in New York, USA. In 2017, she had solo exhibitions at Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, North Adams, USA, and Jeu de Paume, Paris, France, and was included in group exhibitions at Sprüth Magers, Los Angeles, USA, Brennan & Griffin, New York, and Ulises, Philadelphia, USA.

Adam Pendleton is an artist based between Germantown and New York, USA. In 2017, he had solo exhibitions at KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, Germany, Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, UK, and the Baltimore Museum of Art, USA, and was included in group exhibitions at Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna, Austria, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, USA, and Mana Contemporary, Jersey City, USA. His solo show at MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, USA, runs from 3 January until 11 February.

Kameelah Janan Rasheed is an artist and writer based in New York, USA. In May 2017, her solo exhibition 'A Supple Perimeter' opened at the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, Governors Island, New York. Also in 2017, she was included in group exhibitions at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, USA, Visitor Welcome Center, Los Angeles, USA, and Palazzo Contarini Polignac, Venice, Italy.

Main image: Adam Pendleton, 'shot him in the face', 2017, exhibition view at Baltic Centre for Contemporary art, Gateshead. Courtesy: the artist